

Barbara Hammer: lyrics and history

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by Chuck Kleinhans

Barbara Hammer is a remarkably productive and innovative filmmaker. These qualities, which I prize, resulted--in a peculiar way-- in limiting some people's perceptions of her work. First of all, she is prolific, and also she tries new forms and new topics. Those who know her primarily from her initial fame as a lesbian feminist experimental filmmaker would hardly expect her to have done a long piece on the career of a famous male Japanese maker of realist documentaries. But she has, and she has taken on topics ranging from lesbian love and sexuality to intense landscape explorations. She has made film and video meditations on death, which are deeply personal but also films about large issues of war and social justice. She has made polemical pieces on AIDS, and also challenging representations of the female body. Throughout her career, she has sought new technologies, new forms of expression, and new adventures. But as a result, there is not the kind of obvious continuity of theme and topic, or style and execution, that is often noticed and then endorsed by critics. It is not easy to characterize the corpus of her work. But this is also part of who she is as an artist, and a mark of her stubborn independence. She has never held back.

For those new to experimental film and video or unfamiliar with the range of Barbara Hammer's career work, a chronological organization provides the opportunity to see the complex development of a major media artist. With this arrangement the viewer easily traces the evolution from a simple lyricism to a dense referentiality, from technically elementary means to elaborate production and post-production, from spontaneity and celebration to self-reflection and critique, from silence or a simple soundtrack to richly elaborated and layered audio, from the screen as window on the world to screen as site for changing layers of consciousness and reflection.

At the same time a chronological survey presents a potential problem. Inattentive or superficially sophisticated viewers may be puzzled with some work for not matching the canonical expectations of the avant garde or feminist establishments, and Hammer has always been a disturbing presence for both.¹ And a too hasty labeling of her work characterizes much of the critical response to it. But her most significant work of the past three decades demonstrates the mind and talent of a major North American artist who must be assessed and understood on her own terms. Understanding her originality demands breaking some of the easy commonplaces of current media criticism.

Hammer's work in the 1980s gained depth from her technical mastery in the service of a deepened vision and understanding of life's possibilities and limits. In *Sanctus* she achieved a celebration of the body which is corporal and spiritual, presenting the amazement and joy of life simultaneously with the body's inevitable temporality. In *Still Point* she accomplished a fusion of the personal

¹ She's been most often ignored by the experimental film establishment, such as it is, and pigeon-holed as a lesbian feminist, or faulted as a countercultural feminist by others.

and the political which maintains visual and aural contradiction in the service of a heightened sense of her own, and our own, practical and moral situations in the Reagan-Bush era. In *Vital Signs* she wove postmodern media fragments with her own image in a danse macabre that recalls the unity of life and death in medieval art while updating the metaphors for the age of AIDS.

In retrospect, the continuity of cinematic exploration and personal embodiment of her concerns stands clear. The pairing of natural and social worlds mediated by individual vision and camera technology, the layering of images and their repeated reconsideration, the fracturing of consciousness by using the material alteration of film, the obsession with altering light as a fulcrum point between vision in consciousness and sight of the world--these are also major themes of the U.S. experimental film tradition, particularly as found in the history of "visionary film" described by critic P. Adams Sitney. Yet Barbara Hammer's work remains little known in that context, so much a male preserve.

From the perspective of her predecessors in women's experimental film work, however, Barbara Hammer clearly belongs at the center of tradition. Like Mary Ellen Bute's pioneering work in abstract lightpieces in the 30's, often filming from cathode ray tube patterns, Hammer freely works visual rhythms and moves back and forth from film to video to computer in production and editing. Hammer has also followed Marie Menken's film strategies from the 40's and 50's with lyrical examinations of gardens and places, using paint to animate still images, and creating drastic satiric juxtapositions by optically printing images and appropriating scientific documentary and found sound. In the context of Hammer's work, other films by women experimentalists come to mind: Sara Arledge's deadpan mock exposition in the pre-Beat *What Is A Man?*, Shirley

Clarke's intense optical printing in *Bridges Go Round*, the visual romanticism of Storm de Hirsch's lyrics and Chick Strand's documentaries, the whacky humor about women's bodies and lives in Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley's *Schmeerguntz*, the exploration of the filmmaker's own body and unruly sexuality through alterations of film material and layered printing in Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses* and Joyce Weiland's examination of her body and domestic environment in *Water Sark*. In this context Hammer's hand crafted, visually dense, wildly romantic, disarmingly autobiographical, slyly satiric and comically celebratory concerns find a congenial place.

Placing Hammer within a tradition of North American women's experimental film makes much more sense than an earlier approach which tried to fit her into an essentialist "lesbian feminist aesthetic."² Time and experience has shown that the push to a we're-all-alike politics of identity served unity and celebration at the expense of paying attention to crucial differences of race, class, age, experience and lifestyle. Hammer's *Still Point*) serves as her definitive reassessment of 70's cultural feminism. She literally places side by side the romantic image of her

² Essentialist thought in feminist circles of the late 60s and 70s assumed that all women were basically identical, thus eliminating any considerations of history, nation, culture, class, or race. Within a cultural lesbian orientation, often combined with New Age thought and countercultural practice, this conceptual singularity tended to activism in terms of cultural separatism and a focus on issues of women's bodies, health, art, and spirituality. A themed issue of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (Spring 1978), "The Great Goddess," provides an excellent introduction. Within second wave feminism, liberal and socialist feminisms argued against essentialism and for political, institutional and structural change rather than separatism. Within the lesbian community, essentialism was particularly inept at dealing with issues of race, class, cultural background, age, and relations with hetero and homosexual men.

The most sophisticated elaboration of Hammer's early work in terms of a lesbian feminist aesthetic is by Jacqueline Zita. In contrast, Andrea Weiss offers a critique of Hammer for this basis/bias. Claudia Gorbman provides a later discussion. Alex Juhasz discusses the range and development of critical discussion.

companion walking and stretching under the sun in a landscape and the gritty realism of a methodical garbage picker on the streets of New York City, pushing a shopping cart and moving on to the next waste container. Our world view must encompass both realities, the film indicates. Privilege can't obscure vision.

And yet her role as a feminist and lesbian media maker in the 70's needs to be understood in a historical context. For many years, Barbara Hammer was almost alone as an out-of-the-closet lesbian filmmaker. Virtually excluded from the boy's club world of the film avant garde, she showed her own work in feminist bookstores, women's coffeehouses, and women's studies classrooms, often organizing the event and carting the equipment as well. Determined to promote women's media she organized weekend workshops and classes to teach women filmmaking skills, and set up screenings of women avant gardists from the past. She created her own distribution company, Goddess Films, to reach the audience. At the same time she produced film after film, taking every opportunity to make new work, learn new skills, try new techniques.

The mid-1970s works represent women's bodies as physical, gendered, and sexual, existing within a lesbian community. Some function primarily as filmed skits, such as *Superdyke* which enacts groups of women appearing in public space carrying shields emblazoned with "Amazon" or dancing in the street in front of San Francisco's city hall. Simply showing young out lesbians in public provided empowering imagery for a group which had been denied filmic representation from their own point of view and free access to public space (precisely why annual Lesbian/Gay Pride parades were originally so important). The film tends to directly illustrate ideas and those ideas are not necessarily shared by everyone in the intended audience. Fantasies of running through

parks with bows and arrows like ancient amazons are not universal among homosexual women. At the same time, where the film succeeds best appears in documenting guerrilla theater fun such as finding a display of massage vibrators in a crowded department store and publicly appropriating the demonstration model for erotic joy.

The more private films of this period set in domestic space or rural retreat remain personal and compelling while revealing the artist trying to find new forms for representing women's bodies as objects of desire. *Dyketactics* presents a now-classic lovemaking film, with the camera not a distant voyeur or blunt close up recorder as in so much pornography, but a living and moving presence capturing and framing and reframing caresses and touching. *Women I Love* presents a series of portraits which show women in/and nature or in intimate settings in an often magical way. Opening a dishwasher reveals daffodils in bloom, and the flower reappears in a plastic speculum, and being actively kissed by one of the lovers. Another lover appears on a motorcycle trip, another in a forest glen. Lovemaking appears, not isolated, but as part of a continuum of nature and intimacy.

For some feminist critics, the romanticism of Hammer's work in the 1970s created a disturbing undercurrent. Some rejected what they viewed as her ideology of a separate mythic goddess spirituality or Amazon culture. Some found images of naked women in pastoral nature a flight from reality and her autobiographical depictions of her own body and those of her lovers a recapitulation of masculine patterns of looking. Yet the abruptness of the critique fails to address other questions. Clearly, as we see repeatedly in election seasons, the issue of queer sexuality can be used to mobilize voters. In 2004, it

was "defense of marriage," while a decade earlier the depiction of homosexuals in media art can become a rallying cry for the Presidential campaign of Patrick Buchanan, and lead to Senator Jesse Helms decrying Marlon Riggs' video *Tongues Untied* for showing "naked dancing black homosexual men" on PBS. Hammer herself has mocked such hysteria in *No No Nooky TV*, an animation created on the Amiga computer which includes the machine speaking naughty words as well as drawing them, and even in a bit of cybernetic crossdressing wearing bras and underpants while sexually cavorting with the animator who smears the machine's face with paint.

To some extent Hammer's work overlapped with debates in the movement between universal biological and essentialist positions on the one hand and social-historical explanations for female and lesbian difference on the other.³ Not that the filmmaker didn't have something to add to the discussion. *Synch Touch* provides an argument that touch is an earlier and more primary sense than sight, but that the two are closely related, and it emphasizes the corporeality of visual perception. The film also wryly contradicts the argument of much psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory that verbal language provides the master model for consciousness--a position often favored by academic feminists who either ignored her work which hardly fit the heterosexual bias of their theorizing,

³ An academic and theoretical discussion continues among queer thinkers. Christopher Reed summarizes a 1998 international conference in Amsterdam:

In brief, the essentialist view, arising out of 19th century medical discourse, assumes that homosexuality is an innate, historically continuous, biological phenomenon. The constructivist approach arises primarily out of 20th century anthropological research into incidence and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality in so-called non-western cultures. This analysis suggests that the concept of homosexuality--indeed the whole notion of sexual orientation--is specific to our time and place and cannot be assumed to be mappable onto other cultures. Reed, p. 6

or who distained Hammer's "essentialism." Her indirect response: the tongue can be used for more than talking.

By positioning Hammer's work as simply romantic, critics often inhibited appreciation of her remarkably different group of films and tapes in the 1980s when she turned from the female body set in romantic nature to a series of what she called "perceptual landscapes," that made her own investigation of the world's spatial and temporal dimension a key element. *Pond and Waterfall* puts woman in nature, but in a wet suit with an underwater housing around her camera. Air and water form a changing fluid boundary as changes of scale and distance, light and color shape and reshape perception. *Pools* takes the viewer through a liquid (literally and figuratively) exploration of architect Julia Morgan's swimming pools.

Also in the 1980s her understanding of the body itself changed and deepened. The body's social nature came to be represented no longer as a circle of women cavorting in Northern California, but a body imbedded in contradiction and complication through the impact of government censorship and right wing repression, of AIDS hysteria in the media, of disease and dying, of aging, of environmental decay. *Optic Nerve* represents visiting her grandmother in a nursing home, and *Endangered* vanishing animal species. With *Sanctus* Hammer reworks pioneering x-ray medical motion picture footage of bodies by elaborate optical printing and adding color and an intense music track. The result provides a dense and awe-producing view of the body as simultaneously concrete and physical and spiritual. At the end of the 1980s when she re-entered her film and video work by again presenting her image, Hammer moved with a maturity that deepened the irony of her comedy, that opened the wonder and fear

of the body and its often precarious life, that made the filmmaker's personal quest for loving relations deeply grounded in the social and historical moment.

Feminist film studies grant overwhelming attention to the dramatic feature film, either in critiquing the dominant, or looking for subversive subtexts in Hollywood representations, or trying to find feminist alternative narrative strategies. The second order of critical attention considers the substantial body of women's realist documentaries on social issues. Concern for the lyrical avant garde mode and its complex intersection of the personal and the political, of perception and cognition, feeling and knowing, lags far behind. Yet Hammer's work deserves attention for addressing personal, aesthetic, and social issues with a complexity and density rare in fictional narrative or social documentary forms. From such an understanding, much of her earlier work can be taken in a fresher way, beyond some simplifications found in previous criticism.

In the 1990s Hammer began to pursue longer form works. In interviews she attributed some of her motivation to the problems of establishing a media career on the basis of short works which are often assumed as "minor" in stature in film and video festival events. Having become a regular on the women's and queer festival circuits, Hammer had the opportunity to show feature length work often with a personal appearance, and in some arenas, funding for longer work is easier to find. Related to this are historical changes in the festival ethos.

Originally begun as countercultural celebrations of media work that was often speaking directly from the movement and concerns of the subcultural pioneers, in many places festivals have moved from almost improvised grassroots fringe events to well established institutions supported by local business sponsors and national retailers aiming at a chic lifestyle market rather than highlighting

alternative and outlaw social groups. Nowadays one is more likely to attend the opening night of a glossy romantic comedy with an afterparty sponsored by a liquor brand at a spendy hip club than find militant PWAs attending documentaries about the latest protest demonstrations, or the BDSM grassroots showing up for an evening of gritty short films with an in-your-face message about leather lifestyle.⁴

Given this historical shift, Hammer's actual production of longer projects in the last decade underlines some provocative inconsistencies. A case in point is *My Babushka: Searching Ukrainian Identities*, a documentary record of a trip to the Ukraine, where her grandmother was born early in the 20th Century and which she subsequently left at about age 14. Hammer, accompanied by other local and diasporic filmmakers sponsored by a Soros grant, visits with a range of people. Initially the video begins with a search for the grandmother's village and to see if there are any remaining relatives. It seems there are: an elderly woman, her grandmother's niece is found, apparently the closest remaining relative. The visual style combines documentary reportage with abstractions (such as an extreme close up of a glass of tea), or looking in/through old churches, or a close up of dough being made, or blurred and distorted images such as people in urban space apparently taken from a reflective surface giving a slight irregular mirror effect.

Clearly, as the journey begins, the trip is important to Hammer, but is it important to us? The video tends to fall on the side of "my travel film about my ancestors home." The family members don't seem to be significant as sources of

⁴ Kaucyila Brooke, "Dividers and Doorways," *Jump Cut* no. 42 (1998), 50-57.

information; in fact they seem so vague, that one might even wonder if perhaps they are imposters, glad to fake being a relative to the visiting American tourist, in hope that some material benefit might emerge. I don't want to be cynical, but the fact of Hammer parachuting into the scene with no previous research or correspondence and the local people's vagueness invites it. A local male journalist tells (through a female translator who seems to be changing his first person story into a third person narrative) of discrimination against Jews, both locally by Ukrainians and Russians, and then during World War 2 by Germans who massacred thousands at Babi Yar, enthusiastically aided by some Ukrainian and Russian anti-Semites.

Yet the question that Hammer initially asks, "why did they have pogroms?" (something that could be cogently discussed in terms of the history of East European Jews for hundreds of years), is never answered. Instead, examples are presented: of discriminations from the Soviet and post-Soviet era, the monument to Babi Yar and gravestones of the perished (some defaced), a building that was a large synagogue from which Jews were expelled at some time in the past, and of which they have now reclaimed a small section. We see mostly elderly people at a meal in the synagogue, but not any religious practices, or a rabbi or a cantor, or people in worship. This is frustrating, or irritating, depending on one's basic level of interest in the subject; one also senses that Hammer doesn't know much about Eastern European Jews and their history, something perhaps not so unusual for a third generation secular American Jew, but odd for anyone who is going to make an on-location documentary on the subject.

The video could be contrasted with Susan Mogul's *Prosaic Portraits, Ironies, and Other Intimacies: A Travel Diary* (1991), another personal journey to the past (this time Poland and Polish Nazi concentration camps) which is organized around a single women artist enjoying an adventure and meeting interesting local people while establishing personal as well as professional relations. The stigma of the implied imperial tourist perspective whenever Americans go abroad can be overcome when counterweighted with a personable engagement with native informants or as in Mogul's case, with showing the heroine-maker's vulnerabilities (in her case a bit lonely or lovelorn). But Hammer's personal work seldom gives any hint of self questioning or doubt, and in her earliest travel work such as *Our Trip*, an animation of a backpack trip in the Andes, the mood is celebration of the North American couple on an adventure abroad, oblivious to local people, histories, or customs.

Hammer's more documentary and essayistic long form work tends to be organized around the assemblage of shorter materials. This allows her to continue her lyrical strengths in short passages but it also introduces the problem of inconsistency in constructing an overall through-line argument. Typically feature documentary uses a narrative structure that builds tension into a conflict that is then resolved (a pattern easily found in contest documentaries ranging from *Primary* to reality TV's *Survivor*). This is usually cued by a time line or an inexorable unfolding of events. Even the essayistic personal documentary tends to a journey-like structure in which there is a movement to discovery and/or enlightenment.

Perhaps the underlying problem is a slippery notion of history and what historical investigation is or could be. In her earlier short films, even when a history was

stated (the six former lovers in *Women I Love*, or the record of a disintegrating love relation in *Double Strength*), there was no burning need for a fuller context. The former lovers appear in footage that maintains an eternal “now” when screened later, snapshots of the way it was, the way they were. But as she has taken up historical topics in her later years, the understanding of history becomes more of an issue. In *Tender Fictions* a general autobiography is mixed with fictional interventions and diverse appropriations from mass culture to create a “might be true” story of Barbara Hammer’s life. While strong on jokey claims, the piece also leaves deeper questions open and deeper emotions unexamined.⁵

Although her work is always substantially experimental in form and approach, some of her 90s documentary essays offer clearer paths for the audience than others. *Nitrate Kisses* provides an initial framing with a quote from Adrienne Rich about lost histories and a sound track with conversational recollections by older lesbians (apparently gathered at a celebration event of senior dykes), as well as the more analytic voice of a female historian providing context and elaboration. Photos are frequently used (for example of Willa Cather while the audio track discusses her actual life--usually dressed as a man--vs. her literary reputation, which erased any mention of her sexuality).⁶ We see titillating covers of lesbian

⁵ For example, Hammer references being born in Hollywood, cross cuts her childhood image with that of Shirley Temple, and presents herself dancing on the Walk of Stars commemorative tile for Temple, giving the impression that she was a Hollywood brat or LA aspirant. Yet she elides high school years in upper-middle class suburban Westchester County New York, and zips past a nine year marriage, sublimating the teen and twenty-something years that most autobiographies explore as foundational for later life experiences.

⁶ Hammer’s critique can seem simplistic. As a teenager Cather did cross-dress and had crushes on women. But driven to pursue her career as a writer she hid her private life from public scrutiny. And she clearly placed her professional goal of gaining respect and position as a serious author above personal lifestyle expression. In this framework critics and historians are not totally at fault for interpreting the art without reference to her sexuality. Foster’s interview provides Hammer’s point of view on the issues.

pulp fiction in the 40s and 50s while women recall their lives in the same era.⁷ Also running through the piece are images of abandoned buildings in ruins: identified by Hammer elsewhere as standing for “public space”--but if so, why damaged? The old ruins may function too as a crutch to cover the paucity of past images with a metaphoric statement about the passage of time and physical decay, which is itself a more prominent theme in Hammer’s work in the 90s, including here the wrinkled skin of older women.

In the major second section the film includes outtakes of the pioneering silent film *Lot in Sodom* (James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, 1933) which reproduces the Bible story with considerable theatrical exaggeration. Hammer adds a voice over explanation of the silent film original, which is itself intercut with other footage--some of it from silent film comedies showing prissy or hysteric male actors and other footage from a contemporary male couple engaged in a caressing type of lovemaking. Voice overs comment on changes in gay male life, both repressed in the past, closeted, and so forth, and some soundtrack blues songs about “sissy men” in the Black community. There is a kind of estrangement about the whole section, as cuts take us from the theatricalized biblical story to fast paced and exaggerated physical comedy, to languid close-up lovemaking. The most intimate sex passage includes a superimposed scroll up of the 1933 Hollywood production code while a narrator explains that Hollywood officially eliminated gay representations for thirty years.⁸ In the last section, a

⁷ A technique used with more flair and depth in *Forbidden Love* (d. Aerlyn Weissman and Lynne Fernie, Canada, 1992)

⁸ True enough, but the statement obscures the work of contemporary gay men to read a gay history and spectatorship back into classic Hollywood (such as Alexander Doty) and examinations of specific gay production practice, such as Matthew Tinkcum’s discussion of the MGM Freed unit’s musical comedies.

German woman, interviewed by Hammer, discusses lesbians in concentration camps in which the authorized historical version is that Jewish and “political” female prisoners had “platonic” lesbian loves, while the criminal, prostitute and “asocial” ones had “disgusting” physical relations. This voice over is cut with odd footage under a boardwalk with striking shadow patterns on the ground, of which the possible or metaphoric significance is unclear or unknown, and depictions of two stylish tattooed and pierced leatherwomen undressing each other and making love. The film ends with credits revealing it was funded in part with National Endowment for the Arts money at the very time the “culture wars” contestation was at a height.

The strength of *Nitrate Kisses* is in part due to its recurring ability to ground the image material in explanations on the sound track. Experts are present, but detached from bodies, and seem less “authoritative” for not being granted a face and body. The assembled shots of disparate material at times work associatively (e.g., shots from a gay pride parade in Paris, marking a present continuation of queer life) and at other times seem to have no connection (the boardwalk and beach shots). There is a daring willingness to take risks, and yet at other times the fragments seem simply puzzling (shots of a tablet memorializing Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in Paris) when contained in a section on lesbian history lost in the concentration camps and subsequently stigmatization that erased continuity and community.⁹ At another point a bizarre pun appears when the German lesbian feminist historian says of the loss of lesbian documentation: “We have only our oral history, ” and the image cuts to the lovemaking leatherwomen with a close-up of cunnilingus. It’s unclear if this is intended to produce smutty hilarity; in any case it rather undercuts the narrator’s substantive point.

⁹ Stein and Toklas retreated to a country estate during Vichy France.

A direct juxtaposition of found footage and comic intent runs through the adventurous *History Lessons*, which builds on appropriation without the same discourse of sobriety that underlines *Nitrate Kisses*. *History Lessons* has good intentions: to consider lesbian images from the beginning of film until the Stonewall uprising, including popular culture examples and also marking the legal, medical and scientific discourses of control. This is a tall order, given the paucity of and repression of women-generated materials (often available today only in snapshots, personal journals and interviews with elderly dykes) and given the situation of film, having only scattered home movies, which are barely archived. Hammer solves the problem by inserting commercial materials ranging from “girl-girl” porn to lurid covers of lesbian-themed pulp fiction to 50s scandal sheets for the popular culture end, and dramatic recreations of Kinsey-like “scientific measurement” of lesbians. The result, according to the video box: “This is radical sexual politics in a jester’s surprise package of impudent humor and Situationist-style found-footage monkeyshines.” Yet the results are definitely uneven, undercut by remarkably sappy feminist folksongs and clumsy dramatic restagings of past events which invite us to laugh at rather than with the film.

Given the pioneering work of lesbian historians, both academic and amateur, today’s queer audience knows a great deal about many aspects of the past revolving around visual mis-representation and the way the community itself appropriated and re-interpreted mass culture. We know from the extant histories and personal stories that the situation was more complex. First of all, butch/femme didn’t encompass the whole of lesbian experiences, and when role-playing is considered, it raises questions that go far beyond the surface of appearance to inner psychology, the pleasures of imaginative performance, and

the social functions of sharply stereotyped roles. By appropriating extant image materials, such as a WW2 news documentary about women serving in the Army Air Corps (transporting planes, not participating in combat), the film signals a simple re-reading through context. These women, in their various activities, can be read as an Amazon Nation outpost. But staying on the surface, the “hidden history” of lesbians in the armed forces remains a one-line joke. “Could be” is a fantasy, not a reflection of real lived lives.

The tension exists as a fundamental problem of historical analysis. The modernist gay and lesbian stance sought affirmation in identity. Thus the act of “coming out” was finding and declaring one’s true identity against explicit social and political repression. The postmodern queer stance seeks affirmation in diverse and fluid performance. The performance of queer is a constant restaging and acting out always open to another way (and often regarded as a retreat from politics and commitment by those in a more modernist-activist framework). And in a real sense, it diminishes what these depicted women were doing for a complex set of reasons. The Army Air Corp women who became pilots had worthy goals and motives beyond a playhouse lesbian romp: they mastered aviation, they responded to patriotism, they rose to a challenge, and had the reward of physical and mental achievement, and showing they could do “a man’s job.” Some were even heterosexuals.

By working primarily with image material as her inspiration, Hammer clearly intends to “expose” repressive and policing discourses. But, she actually reproduces one of the major errors of the “scientific” discourse. Researchers like Kinsey, trained in empirical science, thought that photographic documentation could actually reveal certain truths (e.g., a film of a woman masturbating to

orgasm) without taking into account acting (for the camera, or faking an orgasm) or the utter failure of empirical external observation to record and account for internal bodily states. Hammer, using archive material or recreating little mimed dramas with today's lesbians, misses the difference between living as a butch in post WW2 US, and 1990s "drag kings" whimsically dressing up in costume and impersonating people from an earlier era. The cases are similar on the surface, but the contemporary image alone cannot capture the lived truth of the past; for that we need voice, memory, words.

As complex as these issues are, it's doubtful that Situationist appropriation can actually provide any analytic reference point. In a much more sober vein, *Resisting Paradise* re-imagines France during the German occupation. Granted a Camargo Foundation fellowship year to do a 1999 residency in Cassis in Southern France, and inspired by the region's landscape and light, Hammer begins with a vigorous revival of her technique of painting on film and creating a bright plastic expression. But, disturbed by images of suffering in news reports of events in Kosovo, she wants to leave and film the battle area. Told the fellowship requires residency, she deflects her attention to the World War Two historical moment when Matisse and Bonnard continued to paint in the same area, apparently oblivious to the war. Finding stories of the French Resistance and a woman who used her government post to create false papers for refugees, Hammer reflects on landscape, art, light and color, personal choices in politics and herself and history. In its best passages this is ambitious and vigorous experimental filmmaking, recasting the lyricism of light and landscape into an ethical drama. At its weakest the judgmental point seems lost: yes Matisse was seemingly totally unconcerned with the World War and just continued making his art. But he was an old man, 75 in 1944: pragmatically, what could he have

done? Or is it that he didn't voice his opposition, feel uncomfortable, make more political art? The implicit comparison is with Hammer, who doesn't give up her fellowship, follow her ideals and desires and run off to war, but who articulates her discomfort. While praising little known Resistance heroism, perhaps the most banal moment in the film is a "dramatic recreation" of Walter Benjamin's crossing the Pyrenees.¹⁰ Often falling between an innovative eclecticism of form and theme on the one hand and an underdeveloped thoughtfulness and pathetic restaging on the other, overall the film intrigues and aggravates.

Given Hammer's uneven struggles with finding an effective long form for the documentary essay, one might anticipate that *Devotion: A Film About Ogawa Productions*, an intense examination of a famous Japanese documentary film collective (certainly a completely unexpected direction for Hammer), would harbor serious problems. And it does. Ogawa Productions, lead by Ogawa Shinsuke, began filming student activism and continued with documenting the fight by peasant farmers to resist the government confiscation of their land to build the Narita International airport. Their landmark political documentary, *Narita: Peasants of the Second Fortress* (1971), achieved an intense power from the film collective living in close relation to the farmers. Lead by a charismatic and difficult leader, the collective consumed itself in internal tensions until and after Ogawa Shinsuke's death in 1992. *Devotion* played at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 2001. Hammer was to be an invited guest, but the events of September 11 prevented her travel. As a result what

¹⁰ This now well-known event has been told by various biographers and commentators with considerably more finesse and attention to historical and biographical complexity than the film's clumsy recreation. Its representation in the film comes off as painfully opportunistic rather than thoughtful, with "Benjamin" walking down a Pyrenees road being more reminiscent of Chaplin's Little Tramp shuffling than a German Jew after months of desperate anxiety seeking escape from annihilation.

would have been a celebratory hosting of the director and her new film was replaced by a roundtable discussion by Hong Kong feminist director Ann Hui (*Boat People*, *Song of the Exile*), Japanese documentary director Sato Makoto, and US based academic Abé Mark Nornes who is writing a critical study of Ogawa Productions. The record of the discussion is remarkable. Hammer, coming to the subject as an outsider, faced the project with predictable problems: she had to work with translators throughout the making of the film; she had no previous familiarity with Japanese film or culture; and while she had unparalleled access to photos and footage the collective shot over many years, she had to rely on personal testimony in the present to make sense of the past history. The roundtable pinpoints key problems such as talking head interviews with cutaways to films and outtakes of Ogawa films but without explanation of the source. The result for those familiar with the original situation is confusion. But, counter-intuitively, Hammer's limits actually potentiate the results, and her interest in the internal dynamics of the collective include bluntly addressing questions that Japanese critics would typically avoid, such as sexual relations and patriarchal patterns in the group. As a result according to the roundtable, *Devotion* is inaccurate and misleading, but also able to explore the complex and hidden side of the Ogawa collective: the pathology of its erratic leader, the repression of women, the deeply neurotic interpersonal relations within the collective, and so forth.

Given the trajectory of Barbara Hammer's entire body of work to date, her persistent concern with perception, her sharp critical wit, and her longstanding work in animation and related techniques, her work must be considered as an analytically sophisticated development of forms and themes which begin in a romantic tradition but which have increasingly evolved into an intellectually

critical while visually pleasurable experience. Hammer's films and tapes move beyond a naive response to the body and the natural environment. At the same time, her work sometimes seems limited by her own framework of extreme individual and personal media making. Throughout her career there's a racial sameness in the women who appear in her work which is not remarked on, however reflexive the form. When footage of African American lesbians enters *History Lessons*, it seems last minute and token in its presence. As the Yamagata roundtable on *Devotion* indicates, Hammer's individualist take allows for both refreshing originality and also idiosyncratic limits and a loss of historical and contextual understanding.

Hammer's major shift from short lyrics to long form experimental documentary produced work which is strongest in its plastic visual episodes, building on her accomplished style of using paint, film, and optical printing. Assembling her films and videos from a wide variety of sources and materials, Hammer maintains change and variety despite temporal length. Where the long form breaks down is in areas such as dramatic re-enactment where she clearly doesn't have skilled direction of talented actors but instead presents amateurish skits. Similarly, while mainstream documentary has a deadly predictable presentation of old photographs, films, and print materials (encapsulated in the "Ken Burns Effect" available in all levels of computer video editing)¹¹ typically Hammer employs a rapid hand-held movement and quick cutting which creates what could be called a "Barbara Hammer Effect." While visually stimulating, it also undercuts an opportunity to examine, study, even savor, the original image. Those experiences are subordinated to the maker's control of our vision. And while

¹¹ The Ken Burns Effect, named after the famous PBS historical documentary producer who uses it so extensively in his work such as *The Civil War*, allows for easy panning over scanned two dimensional images.

Hammer quotes from many and varied sources such as feminist writers and theorists, explaining the quotes in interviews as postmodern appropriations, she also changes them with audio manipulation and selective contexting. By heavily using visual variety, Hammer maintains immediate interest but can also sacrifice a clearer through-line argument or development. In interviews Hammer explains her working method as collecting and assembling from the storehouse of visual materials, but she doesn't seem to go through the same kind of background historical research that informs most long form documentaries.¹² An experiential present overtakes a dialogue with the past. In contrast, appropriating the scientific x-ray movies for *Sanctus* did not need an explanation of the original footage since the lyrical re-use rests on phenomenological awe at the body in motion, not on calling on the medical dimension of the source.

Barbara Hammer's evolving accomplishment in film and video art does what the best experimental work always does. It challenges the audience to new ways of thinking and feeling, new kinds of experience. It moves the boundaries for thinking of media art as well, creating space for a re-evaluation of the past and new issues for the future. In this it is profoundly optimistic. It assumes we can learn and change. Even when facing death, environmental disaster, social decay. Art is then not a retreat from the world but an active engagement with it. The film/video maker faces the world and challenges it, not simply recording life but provoking the audience and changing it.

¹² For example, Connie Field's feminist classic *Rosie the Riveter* (1980) was based on background interviews with hundreds of women. An interesting contemporary case is Michelle Citron's *Mixed Greens* (2005) an interactive DVD with extensive sampling from collected archival materials, interviews, home movies and dramatic re-creations in examining interwoven themes of family history, Irish Jews and lesbian lives.

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